

Suffragettes

For women to participate in public life as citizens fully equal to men is now considered to be a basic right. This was not the case a century ago, when the AWI was first formed. Women were not considered “persons” under the law, and not allowed to vote; and, if their marriages failed, they had no legal recourse to a fair settlement of the value of the family finances. What is more, in western Canada, women were not allowed to own their own farms: if their husbands died, or if they divorced, women were literally homeless.

Until 1832, the ability to vote in Britain was the exclusive right of wealthy men who owned land. This meant that most middle class men and all women were excluded from the democratic process. By 1885, the right to vote was enshrined as a principle for most men, with the exception of some agricultural labourers.

The vote was extended to all men over the age of eighteen and to women over the age of thirty in 1918 and finally to all women over the age of eighteen in 1928. These were hard-won victories of dedicated people like [Emmeline Pankhurst](#) in Britain and [Susan B. Anthony](#) in the United States, where women received the vote in 1920.

Women who advocated for the vote were called suffragettes. The word “suffrage” comes from the Latin “suffragium,” meaning “the right to vote.” About 25% of the first generation of women in the AWI came from England or the United States, where the suffrage movement was strong. Many of these women were well educated and so it is not surprising that several of the early biographies in the [Books of Remembrance](#) mention that the woman was a suffragette.

Acquiring voting rights for women was an important focus in the early days of the AWI; its meetings became key venues for educating women about the electoral process. [Pink Teas](#) were organized to teach women about the political system and about how to vote. Women finally obtained the vote provincially in Alberta in 1916, and federally in [Canada](#) in 1919.

Indeed the suffrage movement was so strong in Alberta that it resulted in a remarkable number of milestones:

- 1916 – [Emily Murphy](#), first woman to become a Magistrate in the British Empire

- 1917 – [Louise McKinney](#), first woman elected to a legislature in the British Empire
- 1917 – [Roberta MacAdams](#), second woman elected to a legislature in the British Empire
- 1918 – Roberta MacAdams, first woman to bring legislation forward in the British Empire

References

Hobsbawm, Eric. *Industry and Empire: The Birth of the Industrial Revolution*. rev. ed. New York: New Press, 1999.